

2015-2020 Dietary Guideline for Americans Upstaged by Politics, Food Sustainability Makes Its Debut, Other Resources for RDNs To Promote Sustainable Foods

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Added sugars are out. Eggs are OK. Healthy eating patterns of nutrient dense foods are in. And though the future of food depends on sustainable agriculture, the topic made a brief, but hopefully impressionable appearance, when the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) were released in January.

The DGAs were prefaced by a joint message from the U.S. Secretaries charged by Congress to update these recommendations every five years. Sylvia Burwell, Secretary for the Department of Health and Human Services, and Tom Vilsack, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, noted that this Eighth Edition, "is grounded in the most current scientific evidence and is informed by the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee."¹ To that end, Congress authorizes the creation of a Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) for each edition that meets for two years, submits a report to the two secretaries, and then disbands.

For this edition, the DGAC considered the issue of sustainability because "addressing this complex challenge is essential to ensure a healthy food supply will be available for future generations."² The DGAC modified two FAO definitions of sustainability for their task: 1) Sustainable diets are a pattern of eating that promotes health and well-being and provides food security for the present population while sustaining human and natural resource for future generations, and 2) Food security exists when all people now, *and in the future*, have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.³

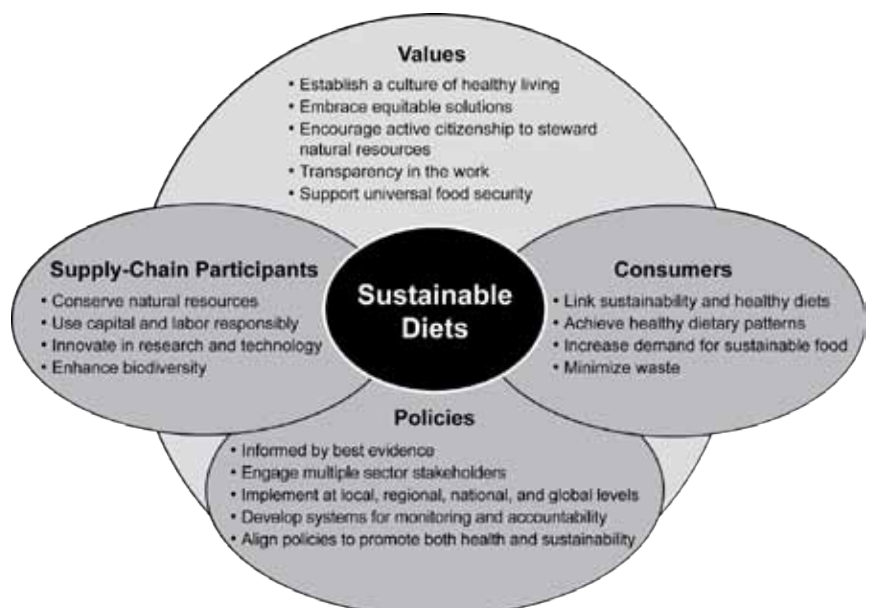
According to Michael Hamm, PhD, a Professor of Sustainable Agriculture at Michigan State University and one of two scientific consultants to the 2015 DGAC, there was a rigorous method-

ology for vetting the available body of research. Some 1700 papers were eventually screened down to 15 studies that the DGAC thought best represented food sustainability and diet.²

The DGAC sustainability review showed that there's interest in dietary patterns instead of individual foods; that dietary guidelines for health and for sustainability are fundamentally compatible; there is a need to increase fruits and vegetables while decreasing meat intake; and that decreases in calories can help to achieve and maintain healthy body weight. Yet, the DGAC acknowledged that they did not address other very important considerations for improving sustainability in our diet patterns such as the way food is produced, how we manage waste (including human waste), where the food is produced and where consumed, and the relationship of food production location to energy and water availability.

It's well known that global food production that relies heavily on natural resources results in deforestation, water overuse, greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity loss. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the world population will explode from 7.2 billion people on the planet today to 9.4 billion by the year 2050.⁴ We commonly hear that we will need to produce 70% more food than we do now to sustain this population. DGAC Consultant and MSU Professor Hamm suggests that this surge in food production will indeed be needed if the U.S. and other

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developed countries continue to eat in similar patterns to the way we do now, that other developing countries follow suit, that meat consumption and excess empty calorie consumption increases, and that there's no reduction of food waste.

With this in mind, the DGAC created a conceptual framework of the elements needed for sustainable diets.⁵ While each element is necessary, Values, such as a culture of healthy living, and Policies, such as engaging stakeholders and developing systems for accountability, need to be in place. Beyond farmers and consumers, there's a plethora of work to be done which is one venue where Registered Dietitian Nutritionists and Registered Dietetic Technicians can influence food sustainability with Americans. The supply-chain needs to conserve natural resources, use labor and capital responsibly, innovate with research and technology, while enhancing biodiversity. Perhaps the Consumers element is where most RDNs and DTRs can be effective—by linking sustainability to healthy diets, helping clients and communities to achieve healthy eating patterns, encouraging consumers to increase demand for sustainable food, and demonstrating the harm of food waste. This is an opportunity for RDNs passionate about sustainability to reach past the current DGAs so that globally there will be enough food to eat within an environmentally sound world.

The review of the research led the DGAC to

present four recommendations in their report.³ Here again are other opportunities where RDNs and DTRs can continue to help move sustainable food forward:

1. Conduct research to determine whether sustainable diets are affordable and accessible to all sectors of the population.
2. Develop, conduct, and evaluate in-depth analyses of U.S. domestic dietary patterns and determine the degree to which sustainability practices, domestically and internationally, are important to food choice.
3. Develop a robust understanding of how production practices, supply chain decisions, consumer behaviors, and waste disposal affect the environmental sustainability of various practices.
4. Determine the potential of economic benefits and challenges to supply chain stakeholders.



The DGAC recommended this agenda so that when the 2020 panel is created, they have the foundation to go forward more robustly with sustainability. Unfortunately, when the DGAC's report was released in February 2015, comments appeared to flood the process from lobbyists. By the fall season, political considerations forced the Secretaries to announce that sustainability would not be included when the current dietary guidelines were released.

It is the hope of many that sustainability will

be a core component of the 2020 DGA review. Until then, RDNs and DTRs need to continue to educate Americans how dietary patterns blend with both human and environmental health. These resources can help to promote food sustainability:

- **Food Day**
www.foodday.org
- **Food Tank**
www.foodtank.com
- **Health Care Without Harm**
<https://noharm-uscanada.org/issues/us-canada/healthy-food-health-care>
- **Plate of the Union**
<http://www.plateoftheunion.com>
- **National Geographic Food**
<http://environment.nationalgeographic.com/environment/green-guide/food/>

1. Dietary Guidelines For Americans 2015-2020, Eighth Edition. <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/message/>. Published 2016. Accessed April 11, 2016.
2. Food Tank Webinar: U.S. Dietary Guidelines and Sustainability: Why They Need Each Other. <http://foodtank.com/news/2016/03/food-tank-webinar-u.s.-dietary-guidelines-and-sustainability-why-they-need>. Published March 2016. Accessed April 4, 2016.
3. Scientific Report of the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. Advisory Report to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of Agriculture. Part D. Chapter 5: Food Sustainability and Safety, page 1. February 2015.
4. United States Census Bureau International Data Base World Populations: 1950-2050. <http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/idb/worldpopgraph.php>. Published 2015. Accessed April 5, 2016.
5. Scientific Report of the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. Advisory Report to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of Agriculture. Part D. Chapter 5: Food Sustainability and Safety, page 3. February 2015.

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